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ABSTRACT

The background and function of a Student Opinion Survey Program at the University of Kansas are described, and suggestions for the development and implementation of polling programs are offered. At the University of Kansas, the technical expertise of staff and students was tapped to provide a credible survey program. Departments and other offices can submit questions to the Student Opinion Survey Committee, which reviews proposals and provides assistance to the requesting group. To reduce administration costs and increase program credibility among respondents, surveys are distributed to students by students. Typically, a survey polls about 30 classes with a total of about 500 students, or approximately 2 percent of the student body. Surveys use multiple-choice questions whenever possible and are formatted for direct data entry. Direct benefits of the program include: improved quality of the survey, improved sampling, standardized procedures, freedom of information, cost efficiency, and credibility. Drawbacks include the dependence on volunteers and the need for publicity to maintain the viability and image of the program. Structural and procedural alternatives are discussed. (SW)

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A NEW TACK FOR AN OLD TECHNIQUE:

THE OPINION POLL ON CAMPUS

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THE ASSOCIATION FOR INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

This paper was presented at the Twenty-Third Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research held at the Sheraton Centre in Toronto, Ontario, May 23-26, 1983. This paper was reviewed by the AIR Forum Publications Committee and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC Collection of Forum papers.

D. R. Coleman, Chairman
Forum Publication
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Abstract

In today's uncertain economic climate, the information required to make administrative decisions is a valued commodity as colleges and universities struggle to provide quality programs and services within reduced or severely strained budgets. When direct feedback from students will assist with management decisions, a growing number of campuses are developing new reliance on an old technique--the opinion poll. By combining resources and expertise, polling programs can provide a cost-effective method for gathering information. The background and function of these programs will be discussed with suggestions for their development and implementation.

Background

In today's uncertain economic climate, the information required to make administrative decisions is a valued commodity as colleges and universities struggle to provide quality programs and services within reduced or severely strained budgets. Often, offices or departments with the least money need information the most to manage wisely their limited fiscal and personnel resources. When direct feedback from students will assist with management decisions, a growing number of campuses are developing a new reliance on an old technique--the opinion poll.

The application of public opinion poll techniques on college and university campuses occurs more frequently as institutions seek systematic and reliable feedback from students on a variety of topics. Much as "real world" polls provide an important link between public opinion and elite opinion (Ippolito, Walker, and Kolson, 1976), student opinions polls are being used to establish new connections between student opinions and the opinions of campus leaders and administrators. While newspapers, polling organizations, and industry use polls to test reactions to policy, monitor satisfaction with programs, and elicit opinions about current events or proposed changes (Erickson, Luttbeg, and Tedin, 1980), campus communities are discovering the importance of this kind of information to successful planning, policy formation, and change.

A growing number of student opinion polls are being conducted by administrative offices, academic departments, student organizations, campus groups, or individual researchers. Some of these studies are clearly special interest polls administered by a unit or group to test opinions in areas bearing directly on their own functions and purpose. In this context, they may be subject to bias during development and to skepticism after publication. Since public trust seldom accrues to special interest

polls, campus units or groups seeking student opinion may consult "outside" professionals, loosely defined as anyone beyond the group's immediate influence who can improve the credibility of their survey. Most small offices and student groups have only limited access to these professional intermediaries whether they be faculty, institutional researchers, or other staff. Although time and advice may be provided by these "outside" professionals on an informal basis, responsibility for the instrument, methods, and findings usually remains with the project initiators. Consequently, many parts of a campus community may be excluded from the benefits of credible student feedback until the professional and financial resource allocation structure changes.

A small but growing number of colleges and universities are developing polling activities within a new organizational context which distributes professional and financial resources more equitably among those who need these services on campus. Crafts and Bassis (1976) report the use of opinion poll techniques at the University of Rhode Island under a program called the University Opinion Index (UOI), and a Gallup-type poll operates as Project Pulse on the University of Massachusetts campus (Benedict, 1977). The University of Kansas program which will be described in detail in this paper is called the Student Opinion Survey Program.

The Development and Operation of a Student Opinion Survey Program

Survey research proliferated at the University of Kansas in the 1970s and on into the 1980s. The campus newspaper, student interest groups, living organizations, academic programs, student and faculty governance, ad hoc or special advisory committees, and various administrative offices were all polling students at one time or another. With all these different groups operating independently, samples and even some questions overlapped,

methods varied in quality, and findings occasionally conflicted. The cost of duplicated effort, time spent defining and defending data, and the lowering of response rates by multiple requests of the same students were apparent though not actually measured.

To avoid some of these problems, the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs and a faculty member from the Department of Political Science established the Student Opinion Survey Program for the purpose of collecting reliable information on the needs and opinions of students at the university. The program would be governed by a Student Opinion Survey Committee charged with coordinating, planning, and developing policies for operating and administering the program on a campus-wide basis. To provide the technical expertise required to operate a credible survey program, committee members were chosen from the faculty, students, and staff in institutional research, political science, the Center for Public Affairs, student affairs, student government, and the campus newspaper. Their combined qualifications included expertise in sampling, question wording, opinion polling, and data analyses, as well as experience with student organizations, publications, and government. A quarter-time graduate assistant and secretarial support were provided by the Office of Student Affairs.

Any office, organization, department or group officially sanctioned by the university may submit questions to the committee on a request form created for this purpose. The committee provides information and assistance to those wishing to formulate survey requests, reviews proposals it receives, and meets with representatives of the organizations who propose surveys to develop good questionnaire items. When competing requests are received, the committee establishes priorities. Accepted proposals are developed into a survey or, in the case of small proposals,

combined into a multi-topic survey. Responses are analyzed and reported by the committee.

In reviewing proposals, the committee focuses on several considerations. Does the information already exist? Will the information either promote or enhance dialogue, assist with planning, policy formation, or an administrative decision? Is a survey the correct methodological procedure for obtaining this information or can the information be better obtained in some other way? Are the questions worth the expenditure of financial and professional resources? Will the survey harm anyone? If competing requests exist, which proposal is most important to the university community at this time? Where proposals have been refused, it has usually been for a lack of direct benefit to the university, a lack of suitability to the ten-minute in-class survey format used by the committee, or problems with validity likely to occur with certain topics.

To date, the committee has reviewed proposals on a wide variety of subjects from many campus organizations. Among the accepted proposals were questions about the usefulness of course evaluations at the end of the semester; the sale of 3.2% beer at football games; programs sponsored by the Student Union Activities group; the location of ballot boxes for student senate elections; the kinds of behavior which constitute sexual harassment; health services provided by the campus clinic; campus regulations governing bicycles; the current advising system and needed improvements; and the value of students lobbying for their interests at the state capitol. Acceptance of a proposal by the committee does not, however, imply acceptance of every question as it is received. The committee may spend considerable time with the author of a proposal in order to determine the underlying purpose of the questions. Conceptually,

this process involves separating the research question from the proposed questions. As Sudman (1982, p. 11) notes, the research question is

> the touchstone against which decisions are made about particular questions to be included in the questionnaire. The research question is most often general and may involved abstract concepts that would not easily be understood by the respondents being surveyed.

Considerable skill in question wording may be required to elicit answers to some kinds of research questions without alienating respondents, who are under no obligation to answer questions, and without violating social norms which govern information transactions between individuals in a survey context. Ultimately, the survey developed by the committee will be judged by "the degree to which it elicits the information that the researcher desires" (Sudman, 1982, p. 17).[1]

Once a set of questions is developed and approved by both the committee and the proposing organization, it is administered to a stratified random sample of undergraduate classes. Using timetable information, classes are listed by level with their corresponding student enrollment. Enrollments are subtotalled by level and totalled overall so that the proportion of student enrollment by level can be determined and classes selected at random to fill quotas by level. Instructors of selected classes are contacted by telephone and asked if they would be willing to contribute ten to fifteen minutes of class time on a particular day for the administration of a student opinion survey. Thus far, faculty cooperation has been well over 95%.

To reduce administration costs and increase program credibility among respondents, surveys are distributed to students by students who are

recruited in a variety of ways. If the survey is proposed by a student organization, that group is asked to help administer the survey in exchange for the professional and financial assistance it received from the program. If the survey is proposed by an academic or administrative office, they are asked to contribute time within the regular working schedule of their student employees, or a member of the student of the student opinion survey committee may ask a student honorary organization, academic club, or service group to recruit volunteers. A student is assigned to a class which does not conflict with his or her own course schedule. On the assigned day, the student reports to the Office of Student Affairs to pick up a survey packet which contains the appropriate number of surveys, instructor's name, course number, campus location, instructions for administering the survey, and background information about the program and the survey itself so that queries during administration of the survey can be answered or referred correctly.

Typically, a survey polls about thirty classes with a total of about 500 students, which at the University of Kansas, is approximately 2% of the student body. New random samples of classes are selected for each survey so that no instructor is asked to contribute class time more than once a year. Faculty who are asked to provide feedback about the administration of the survey in their classes. The feedback is reviewed by the committee to improve and maintain the quality of the program. To date, most feedback has been positive and participation among students in sampled classes has been very high.

Some problems with this method of administration do occur and are being corrected. Student volunteers may go to the wrong office to pick up materials, arrive late to their appointed class, fail to pick up their packet, or miss their class appointment. In order to correct these

problems, a back-up system has been developed so that a member of the student opinion survey committee or the program's graduate assistant is on call at those times when class surveys are scheduled to occur. If a packet for a particular class is not picked up fifteen minutes before the class is scheduled to meet, the secretary in the Office of Student Affairs will notify the back-up person on the committee who will then administer the survey to the class.

Surveys use multiple choice questions wherever possible and are formatted for direct data entry. A typical survey requiring approximately forty data entry keystrokes cost between $40 and $50 to enter and verify. The committee's graduate assistant or a member of the committee analyzes the data using the SPSS programs FREQUENCIES and CROSSTABS, with additional analyses conducted if the data merit it. Results are assembled by the chair and reviewed by the committee before response percentages are released to the university community at large via a written report to administrative offices and press releases to the students, staff and local newspapers. The committee's charge includes a broad distribution of results; hence, the committee advocates publication, dissemination, and discussion of results and issues connected with each of its project.

Structural and Procedural Alternatives

The structure of a student opinion survey committee and procedures for administering a student opinion survey program could vary considerably from campus to campus without jeopardizing its operation or benefits as long as the senior administration supports both the concept and budget of the program. For example, at the University of Kansas, the Office of Institutional Research and Planning developed a MARK IV program which uses the timetable data base to stratify classes and count enrollment by course

and by level. The program was designed to be run each semester by nonprogrammers who key in appropriate parameters according to simple instructions; thus, professional time on this aspect of the project was required only during the design and coding of the program. At a smaller institution or where timetable information is recorded differently, other approaches to the construction of a sample base might be more efficient. Printed data, such as timetables and class rosters, might be used without any programming effort.

Several staffing alternatives could be implemented without significantly changing the nature of the survey program as long as required functions are performed well. At the University of Kansas, the Office of Student Affairs has dedicated a quarter-time graduate research assistant to perform most of the functions associated with administering the survey. Duties of the position include drawing the stratified random sample of classes, requesting class time from faculty for survey administration, coordinating and scheduling student volunteers to administer the surveys, collecting completed surveys from the volunteers, preparing surveys for data entry, and running the SPSS programs to analyze the data. The present use of a graduate assistant is considerably more expensive than the use of undergraduate student hourly assistants would be, but quality is the variable of critical importance. The credibility of the program and its ability to attract volunteers from the faculty, staff, and student population depends largely on its reputation for providing professional service. If the committee is mired in supervisory or administrative details--tasks better delegated to qualified students--its responsibility for proposal review, question wording, and data reporting could suffer.

Other staffing alternatives might include shifting responsibility for writing reports and press releases from the chair to members of the

committee, and using departmental secretaries instead of student volunteers to distribute surveys to classes in their departments. As long as a sufficient level of moral and financial support for the program exists, the particular mechanisms used can be tailored to individual campuses and to resources available to the program.

Direct Benefits of a Student Opinion Survey Program

As the Student Opinion Survey Program is conceived and operated at the University of Kansas, several benefits appear to its various users and sponsors.

1. Improved quality. Since the governing committee consists of social science faculty, student affairs and institutional research staff, and students from representative organizations, technical expertise and a campus-wide perspective can be applied to each proposal. The resulting instrument is frequently better than what might develop under less intensive review.
2. Improved sampling. The committee has access to a stratified random sample of students from all undergraduate courses and from the various schools of the university which might be difficult for individual researchers to achieve. By reducing the number of requests for in-class time to once a year, by insuring some degree of quality in the instrument used, and by assuming complete responsibility for the project, the committee enjoys a high degree of cooperation from the faculty who are freed from the necessity of judging requests from individual researchers.
3. Standardized procedures. Surveys are administered in a uniform manner with back-up provided to avoid sampling error.

4. Freedom of information. If the charge to the committee grants political autonomy as it does at the University of Kansas, surveys on sensitive campus issues can be conducted without political or administrative constraint.

5. Cost efficiency. Student organizations and small offices can pool questions on a single survey, obtain professional assistance with question wording and data analysis, all at a fraction of what this service would cost them individually, if it were available to them at all. Duplication and overlaps are avoided by filtering research intentions through the committee.

6. Credibility. Since surveys are developed, administered and analyzed by the committee, special interest bias is minimized at all stages of the research process. Proposals whose main purpose is to reinforce the status quo can be reconstructed to include questions which broaden the possible responses to the topic.

7. Staff development. Members of the committee can benefit by working on polls with competent faculty, staff, and students from a variety of offices and departments.

Drawbacks and Remedies

Only a few problems have occurred within the program as it is currently structured at the University of Kansas.

1. Dependence on volunteers. Using student volunteers has diminished the program's credibility and good will where class appointments were missed. A back-up network of committee members was implemented at KU, but students paid as survey administrators or an organized team of student volunteers motivated to perform this service regularly are possible alternatives.

2. Dependence on publicity. Because the program has no recognized headquarters, it depends on publicity to maintain its visibility and image as an available service. Turnover in the student body and student organization leadership make this an ongoing effort. At the beginning of each academic year, the program announces its services on publicity sheets which are sent to student organizations and posted on bulletin boards around campus, through ads and articles placed in campus publications, by word of mouth, and from interest generated by previous survey results. A listing in the campus telephone directory and promotion by student affairs personnel working most directly with student organizations help to remind potential program users of its existence.

Conclusion

Whether a campus supports a student opinion survey program will depend on an assessment of its costs and benefits to the institution as a whole and to the particular office or unit within the organization which sponsors it. Cost, in this case, is easier to assess than benefit. Costs can be measured from estimates of time and money involved in developing, conducting, and publishing the results of a survey, but benefits require assessment of how both the service and information it generates are used. To the extent that the program improves the quality of a sampling for surveys, standardizes procedures, consolidates resources, and strengthens the credibility of the data gathered, it contributes a valuable service to the university. How the information generated is used, however, often extends beyond the control of the program.

Beyer (1982) identifies three types of use associated with research findings which may assist in evaluating a survey program's potential

benefits. Where information is used instrumentally, that is, in action-oriented ways, the benefits of the information are most apparent and tangible. For example, if students favor appointments over unscheduled visits at the campus hospital, this information can be used instrumentally to establish an appointment system.

Where information is used conceptually, that is, for general enlightenment, results might influence behavior or attitudes but will probably not produce program or policy changes for some time. A survey which shows that students hold a low opinion of student government may change the senate's self-image without resulting in any immediate action. At some later date, however, student representatives may alter their campaign style, choose to address different issues, or conduct public meetings in a manner congruent with information obtained from an earlier opinion poll. While the benefits of this kind of information use are considerably more difficult to measure, they may be of equal or greater benefit to the campus.

The least tangible use of information from a survey program is symbolic use, where results serve to reinforce or legitimize the status quo. Minimal debate and change occur where a survey merely strokes the back of the organization. But where minority opinions are dominating the campus environment, a survey which allows the majority opinion to be heard can be an important, symbolic use of information.

While a Student Opinion Survey Program is not an information panacea, it is a low cost way to open or maintain channels of communication among various campus constituencies and to expand the role of institutional researchers.

Footnote

[1] The development of survey questions is not within the scope of this paper. Readers are referred to Sudman (1982) and Dillman (1978) for discussion of question wording and survey design.

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